

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 847

EA 018 375

AUTHOR Willower, Donald J.; Smith, Jonathan P.
TITLE Organizational Culture in Schools: Myth and Creation.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (70th, San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Athletics; *Behavior Standards; Educational Environment; Informal Organization; Interviews; Organizational Theories; Participant Observation; Principals; Secondary Education; *Social Behavior; *Social Organizations; *Student Attitudes; *Student Subcultures; Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Grounded Theory; *Organizational Culture

ABSTRACT

Data were collected from two public secondary schools located in the northeastern United States in order to search for indicators of culture peculiar to each school. Culture was defined in terms of shared norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and patterns of activity. One school was small, was located in a rural area, enrolled about 500 students in grades 7-12, and was staffed by approximately 35 professionals. The other school was larger, was located in a small city, enrolled about 2,300 students in grades 10-12, and was staffed by about 150 professionals. Sixty interviews at the larger school and 40 at the smaller one were conducted with teachers, students, administrators, and other staff members. Participant observation of the two schools was undertaken for a total of 26 school days. Neither of the two schools exhibited an organizational culture that cut across the schools' constituent groups. Students in both schools divided into a number of aggregates and identified being with their friends as a major focus of school life. The closest the students came to identifying with the school was in connection with athletics. The teachers in both schools were relatively fragmented and isolated. A number of norms in the teacher groups encouraged fragmentation as did the lack of a major conflict. (MLF)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

* Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D. J. Willower

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN SCHOOLS:
MYTH AND CREATION

by

Donald J. Willower

and

Jonathan P. Smith

The Pennsylvania State University

Paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research
Association, San Francisco, April 1986.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN SCHOOLS: MYTH AND CREATION

The concept of organizational culture has become quite fashionable in the recent literature. The success of several works in business administration (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982) and interest in the management of Japanese firms (Ouchi, 1981) have apparently helped to popularize the idea of a culture that is peculiar to a particular organization.

Works such as these commonly set forth the notion that organizational cultures can contribute to and reinforce the attainment of organizational purposes. This is bound to be intriguing to discerning researchers and practitioners of administration. It is an attractive idea because it de-emphasizes bureaucratic controls in favor of shared normative commitments. It poses for the administrator the problem of building group norms and the invention of traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) that serve organizational aims. It poses for the researcher a whole series of problems regarding how cultures change and the role of subcultures or constituent collectivities within particular settings.

In education, there is a long tradition based on the study of schools as social systems or as Waller (1932) put it more than 50 years ago, the study of schools as miniature societies. Waller's classic treatment of schools explicitly considered school cultures and emphasized such concepts as symbols, shared norms, and values. Given Waller's seminal effort and work stemming from it, current writing on school cultures could hardly be called new without using that word promiscuously.

There are, however, features that distinguish the present from the past work. Students of organizational cultures are more concerned with particular settings. Their general problem is the process of cultural change in organizational settings. They appear to be more interested in what an organization might become than in what it is and they tend to de-emphasize the generic characteristics of various organizational types.

There are some important difficulties attending the application of the concept of organizational cultures to schools. The reasoning goes as follows (Willower, 1984; 1986). Schools are organizations composed of subcultures, most notably those represented by the student and the teacher groups. These groups typically exhibit quite different, even conflicting cultural content and patterns. This is reflected, for instance, in well-known norms commonly found within each group. They can be illustrated by the anti-stool pigeon norm among students and the "don't criticize a colleague in front of students" norm among teachers (Willower, 1971a; 1971b). Such norms protect each group in its relationships with the other. They also suggest why Waller (1932) depicted teachers and students as natural adversaries. The administrators constitute still another group having a special set of interests. It, too, could be treated in subcultural terms.

It has been argued that it is a mistake to speak of a teacher culture and that instead there are "cultures of teaching" (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). Of course, that is correct. Teacher (and student) groups differ from school to school. Indeed, it is, in a sense, a sociological fallacy to depict any collectivity as if it were entirely uniform. At the same time, the exploration of commonalities among groups in at least roughly similar settings as they ply the same occupation can furnish sociological

insights. The trade-offs are obvious. An analysis that attends to similarities is likely to slight differences and vice-versa. These cautions should be kept in mind when assessing any research of the type reported here.

Despite the extended discussions of organizational cultures in the literature, there has been very little empirical work on particular school cultures. The present study was a preliminary and exploratory effort to gather data on that topic.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to examine selected schools to search for indicators of culture peculiar to each school. Culture was defined in terms of shared norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and patterns of activity. A key question was whether an organizational culture could be found that went beyond commonalities within such groups as the teachers or students.

Procedures

Data were collected on two public secondary schools. Interviews that ranged from casual and open-ended to structured were conducted with teachers, students, administrators, and other staff members. The structured interviews consisted of questions designed to probe for shared elements of culture. For instance, such questions as, "What does this school mean to you?" and "What is most important to you about this school?" were used to get at participants' feelings toward and identification with the school as a whole. The interviews totaled 100, with 60 at the larger of the two schools and 40 at the smaller one. Participant observation was

also undertaken; the two schools were observed on an alternating basis for a total of 26 school days. The on-site observations were done towards the end of the academic year when graduation and other ceremonial activities might reflect the expression of school cultures. In addition, documents such as newspaper clippings and school yearbooks and artifacts such as bulletin boards and trophy cases were examined in each school.

Throughout the study, later data collection was influenced by earlier data collection. That is, leads garnered earlier in the study were explicitly followed up in later observations and interviews. The research was explicitly oriented to the development of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in the sense that we hoped that the data would stimulate speculative explanation concerning school cultures.

The Schools

Both of the participating schools were public secondary schools located in the northeastern United States. One of them was small and located in a rural area. It enrolled about 500 students in grades 7-12 and was staffed by approximately 35 professionals. The other was larger and was located in a small city. It had roughly 2,300 students in grades 10-12 and a professional staff of about 150. The larger school had three assistant principals in addition to the principal while the smaller one had a principal but no assistants.

The rural school, which will be called Deer Ridge School, was situated on a large tract in a rural area halfway between two small towns. The building, which was about 25 years old, included the facilities typically associated with a comprehensive secondary school such as an auditorium, library, cafeteria, industrial arts shops, and a computer laboratory. The

other school, which we will refer to as Rockton School, took up more than a city block and consisted of connected old and new wings. It, too, had a range of facilities, but on a much larger scale than those of its smaller counterpart.

Findings

Our observations are divided into two major parts. The first concerns the faculties of the two schools including the administrators. The second deals with the students.

Faculty

The Deer Ridge faculty could be characterized as a collection of individuals. There was little unity or sense of belonging to a group. According to the teachers, they had virtually no social interaction with one another outside of the school setting. A scheduled Christmas party had to be cancelled because of lack of a response on the part of the teachers. A proposed spring dinner suffered the same fate. The representative of the teachers' union at the school stated that the school district would not have to worry about a strike because the teachers could never agree on a common issue. This individual further described "teacher unity" at Deer Ridge as "lousy."

Faculty interactions at school were determined primarily by schedule and proximity. All but a few of the faculty meetings occurred on the departmental level. The failure of the principal to have substantive general faculty meetings was widely perceived by the teachers as a way of lessening their influence. Several of them jokingly stated that they were probably the only teachers in the region who wanted more meetings.

Actually the principal had conducted two general meetings during the school year, one at the beginning and one just prior to an in-service day, but both had been largely informational. Some of the teachers stated that the principal's one-on-one operation was a kind of divide and conquer approach.

There were two faculty lounges at the school, one for smokers and one for non-smokers. The smokers' lounge was considered to be the place where one could get the latest gossip about what was going on in the school and the community. It was also the scene of considerable griping, largely about the administration. Several of the teachers who did not go to the smokers' lounge indicated that they wanted to avoid gossip and politics. As was suggested earlier, the principal was the object of some teacher dissatisfaction. In fact, the principal, who served as a teacher at the school for many years prior to his appointment, had been the leader of the teacher group. His accession to the principalship not only left the teachers' without an informal leader, but it also meant that the new principal was thoroughly familiar with the ways the teachers resisted the administration, information which many of the teachers stated was used against them. These teachers also criticized the principal for his shift to the other side of issues he had argued for when he was a teacher.

The school district's superintendent also received his share of disapproval from the teachers. Here the main complaint was that the superintendent's interest in vocational education was resulting in a lessening of emphasis on the more traditional academic curriculum. Several of the teachers described academics as taking a "back seat" to the "high tech" vocational program, the latter a reference to the fact that some computers had been secured through vocational education grants.

Still, most of the teachers indicated that they were happy to be at Deer Ridge. They often mentioned the desirable rural character of the area and the fact that it was possible for the teachers to know all of the students. Many of the teachers were from the local area and many of those who were not had lived there for a long time. New teachers at Deer Ridge reported that they were subjected to a "subtle evaluation" by their colleagues. They were "sized-up" in terms of such things as whom they became friends with and how they lined up in terms of faculty-administration differences.

As individuals the teachers spoke of providing their students with the kind of education that would enable them to be productive members of the community and society. However, they did not see the administration as an ally in this endeavor, nor were their fellow teachers mentioned in this regard. By and large, the teachers were content to carry out their assignments and lead their separate lives in the community. Even though the year-end teacher evaluations and their perceived unfairness were foremost as a topic of conversation during the study, the teachers who spoke about this in the interviews seemed more curious about how they stacked up against the other teachers than in anything else.

The teachers at Rockton High School often referred to themselves as "isolated." When asked about the causes of this isolation, they cited most often the departmental organization of the school and its physical division into two wings.

Like their counterparts at Deer Ridge, the members of the Rockton faculty were reluctant to participate in social activities. A spring social had to be cancelled when only a handful of teachers signed up for the event. Some of the teachers remarked that this was not always the

case. Some years ago, the school's men teachers had an annual weekend affair featuring beer and food at an out-of-the-way location such as a hunting camp. Also, there had been several card playing groups in the past. However, despite fond memories, there appeared to be no interest in reviving the traditional all male weekends and several of the teachers commented that no one had time for cards anymore.

The teachers typically interacted with members of their own department more than they did with others, and the majority of them ate lunch with their departmental colleagues, although a fair amount of same sex groupings were also noted. That is, female department members often ate together and males often did the same. Despite this departmental focus, being in a department did not ensure participation in a close-knit group. Considerable intra-departmental conflict was reported. This ordinarily took the form of bickering over such matters as teaching assignments and access to equipment designated for departmental use.

The principal of the school indicated that he viewed himself primarily as a manager. He also stated that he had been influenced by the "Japanese model" and that he saw the school as a corporate family working together to attain organizational goals as reflected in student achievement scores. The principal often followed up on this, studying student test scores and questioning teachers about scores that were, in his estimation, too low.

The teachers expressed a commitment to educational aims during the interviews, but they believed that their autonomy and status were threatened by the emphasis on test results. Most of them preferred to work with better students who were likely to achieve well.

A sore point for many teachers was a policy instituted by the administration that required all students to write an essay in every class.

This was an attempt to improve student writing skills, but many teachers questioned its value. The math teachers in particular expressed dismay over the requirement. For many teachers, the essay policy meant not only extra work, but extra work that was especially disagreeable. In general, the teachers felt that they had little influence on decision making in the school. The principal had established a liaison committee of teachers with which he met to discuss teacher concerns. Many of the teachers stated that while this was a good idea, their concerns fell on deaf ears. The picture presented of the principal was of a person known for his inability to listen. According to many of the teachers, he heard what he wanted to hear and acted accordingly.

The three assistant principals were each assigned to a grade level which they followed during its three years at the school. They acted largely as go-betweens for the principal, channeling administrative directives to teachers and students and monitoring compliance. The assistant principals were seen essentially as administrators, rarely functioning as spokespersons for the teachers at their respective grade levels.

Given shifts in student enrollment, in the past teachers had been given heavier loads or reassigned. A number of the teachers expressed anxiety about such possibilities in the future. Some of them explicitly stated that, in such circumstances, it was necessary for them "to look after number one." This added to the sense of isolation mentioned earlier.

Students

At Deer Ridge the students appeared to divide by curriculum. The three main groups were the "aggies" made up of students majoring in the

vocational-agriculture program, "techers" consisting of students in the vocational-technical curriculum, and the "academics" composed of those in other programs. The latter group was the smallest of the three. In addition, there was a group of students who were called "preppies," a designation based mostly on dress.

In the main, the students reported that they were interested in being with their friends at school. Most of the students indicated that they liked the Deer Ridge School and would rather go there than elsewhere. A number of the students cited the small size of the school as an advantage in being able to know everyone, but they also stated that they preferred to be with their friends and their own group.

The students generally associated commitment to the school with the athletic programs although a frequent comment was that school spirit depended on winning teams. A Pep Club had been organized but had not been very effective as far as the students' perceptions were concerned. The extra-curricular activities of the school suffered because of busing and lack of teacher support. Since the bulk of the student body rode the school buses, those who wished to participate in after school activities had to adhere to an inconvenient schedule. The teachers felt, for the most part, that sponsorship of activities and clubs should be the job of the new teachers who had yet "to pay their dues." However, because most of the teachers were not new and felt they had already done their part, there was little adult leadership available for extra-curricular activities. Most of the students were not at all bothered by this state of affairs, since as some of them put it, they "had better things to do with their time" anyway.

The students at Rockton also divided by curriculum but not as sharply as the Deer Ridge students. Here also was the vocational education group

but without a notable agriculture component, as well as several other majors such as business and college preparatory. In this large school, there was also a tendency for students to group in terms of prior, sometimes neighborhood, friendships and interests like athletics. One group mentioned by most of the students was the "Hi-C's" a name given to students who were typically fashionable in dress and frequent participants in school activities. Several interviewees said they believed "Hi-C" meant "High Class," but were uncertain as to the term's origin. Many of the students referred to this group disparagingly, sometimes using the term, "snobs." Although there was an extensive extra-curricular program at the school, both students and teachers agreed that only a small number of students participated, with the same students frequently participating in a large number of activities.

Athletics played a major part in the life of the school. The student Handbook linked athletics and academics stating that, "Our philosophy is directed toward the student athlete's academic achievement. Academics and athletics are synonymous at Rockton High School." There was an active "Big R" Booster Club composed of alumni and community members that supported the school's teams, especially the football and basketball teams. There was other evidence of interest in athletics including a substantial display of trophies from past victories in the school lobby. Even the trash barrels that were placed around the building were conspicuously painted in the blue and gold school colors.

However, some of the students commented that the adults of the community were more oriented towards the school athletic programs than were the students. Teachers and students alike indicated that "school spirit" depended heavily on winning teams. A losing football season and a winning

basketball season had, in juxtaposition, presented convincing evidence of this in terms of attendance, pep rallies, and so on. Like the students at Deer Ridge, the Rockton students typically stated that what meant most to them at school was being with their friends.

It might be mentioned that there was little talk among the students at either school concerning ceremonials such as graduation. That event is apparently important mainly to the graduates and it is a ritual of separation, not of incorporation (Van Gennep, 1909).

Discussion

It is well to begin this discussion with the usual caveats. In a field study of this type conducted at only two school sites, we cannot be sure about the extent to which our data are representative, although we selected two quite different schools with that concern in mind. The problem of representativeness as well as others such as observer effects underscore the comparative high fallibility of the method employed. Nevertheless, field studies are ideally suited to exploratory inquiry and the development of theoretical conjectures.

Neither of the two schools exhibited an organizational culture that cut across the schools' constituent groups. The teachers in both schools were relatively fragmented and isolated and the students in both schools divided into a number of aggregates. Put another way, the main subcultures in the schools, those of the teachers and students, were quite heterogeneous. The teachers in particular were involved in informal and departmental groups that were ordinarily neither cohesive nor highly influential as far as the individual teachers were concerned.

At the same time, most and possibly all of these teachers subscribed to norms like the one mentioned earlier that barred criticism of a colleague in front of students. Norms of this kind, which are protective of the group, appear to be accepted as a matter of course but become objects of attention only in the infrequent cases in which they are transgressed. Put in more general terms, norms that are not being violated are not salient, yet they remain as latent social understandings that could be brought into play by certain kinds of behavior.

This line of thought leads to a more general speculation. We suspect that the fragmentation of the teacher groups at both schools was at least in part a function of the lack of major conflict. Despite the intra-departmental bickering at Rockton and the usual competition for resources among departments at both schools, there were no teacher groups that were fighting one another at either school. The teachers at both schools got on reasonably well with the students as well. Finally, even though neither principal was popular, both of them actively kept on top of emerging problems and were adept at the management of small crises, keeping the teachers protected, even if dissatisfied over their principals' leadership styles and unilateral decision making. Put another way, the teachers at both schools could afford to be fragmented. Substantial conflict within the teacher group would have required resolution and would have probably resulted in a more active teacher subculture, while substantial conflict with students or the administration or with outsiders would likely have produced greater cohesion among the teachers. An additional consideration was the protection afforded the teachers by their union which was a formidable force in state politics. The teachers paid their dues and a kind of loose allegiance to the union. Its existence

could have been another factor making a strong teacher subculture unnecessary.

The teachers at the two schools professed commitments to doing their best for the students. However, this was seen as an individual matter. The classroom structure and the autonomy norm no doubt reinforced such individualism. Moreover, the principals at both schools were thought by most of their teachers to be engaged in carrying out their own agendas which the teachers did not connect to instructional aims at least in terms of the teachers' definition of the situation. Even the efforts of the Rockton principal to improve student achievement were considered to be misdirected and an interference with teaching rather than a positive undertaking.

Most of the teachers wanted to do their jobs in their own ways. They placed a high value on their autonomy and resented virtually anything that reduced it. Thus, while it was not uncommon for Rockton faculty members to complain about the students' writing skills, the policy requiring essays in all classes was a genuine irritant.

For the students at both schools, being with their friends was a major focus of school life, a finding consistent with past studies of student groups (Cusick 1973; Tarr, 1977). The closest the students came to identifying with the school was in connection with athletics. This was more clearly the case at Rockton than it was at Deer Ridge, but at both schools, students' commitments to the "teams" were high only during winning seasons. Although some teachers at each school avidly supported the athletic teams, ordinarily most did not attend the games and some were completely indifferent.

Athletics, as a potential focal point for identification with the school, suggests a dilemma because of the possibility that highly successful athletics could deflect attention from the regular academic programs of the school. Even though the Rockton student Handbook equated athletics and academics, the teachers knew better. Teachers at both schools were leery of the possibility of the "tail wagging the dog" when it came to athletics and academics. Many of the Deer Ridge teachers felt that the emphasis on vocational education there was already preempting important parts of the more traditional curriculum.

Many of the features of the typical school organization appear to be stacked against the formation of a peculiar school culture devoted to educational aims. The teacher and the student groups are devoted to different values and have different agendas even if they are not always explicitly in opposition to one another.

A number of the norms in the teacher group such as that for autonomy and non-interference in a colleague's teaching activities encourage the kind of fragmentation we found. As previous work suggests, other norms in the teacher subculture such as that requiring social distance between teachers and pupils, essentially protect the teacher group in its relationships with students (Willower, 1971a; 1971b). The hierarchical character of the relationship between principals and teachers presents another barrier to unified efforts. It generates norms geared to protection in that realm. The effects were quite clear in the two settings examined in the present investigation.

We found relatively weak teacher subcultures in both of the schools that were observed. Strong ones, however, would probably have been even greater inhibitions to the development of peculiar organizational cultures.

The idea that such organizational cultures will be found in schools selected at random appears to be a myth.

We contend that a special organizational culture tied to educational goals is not likely to be found in normal circumstances. It has to be a deliberate creation. The school principal is obviously the person who is in the best position to assume leadership in such an undertaking, but whoever leads the way should be aware of the importance of understanding the nature of the school's subcultures and the normative structures typically found in such organizations. A problem that should be anticipated if the principal is the keystone of a school culture is the stability and staying power of a school culture dependent upon an individual. Long-term structural supports in the organization would appear to be essential.

Another set of issues concerns the ends served by school cultures. It cannot be assumed that a strong organizational culture will serve multiple educational purposes unambiguously. School cultures that stress academics could stint critical thinking or social skills. Further, strong cultures have a tendency to stress conformity and limit individual initiative. It would be essential from a philosophical standpoint to develop school cultures that are open and educative. In any case, an empirical literature on school cultures, and on what we have called the subcultures, especially the adult ones, is clearly needed.

References

- Cusick, P. A. (1973) Inside high school. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Deal, T. E. & Kennedy, A. A. (1982) Corporate cultures. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Feiman-Nemser, S. & Floden, R. E. (1986) The cultures of teaching. In Wittrock, M. C. (Ed.) Handbook of research on teaching (pp. 505-526). New York: Macmillan.
- Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger, T. (1983) The invention of tradition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ouchi, W. (1981) Theory Z. New York: Avon.
- Peters, T. J. & Waterman, R. H. (1982) In search of excellence. New York: Harper and Row.
- Tarr, J. S. (1977) Students in groups: the impact of friendship and values on the high school. Administrator's Notebook. 25 (8) 1-4.
- Van Gennep, A. (1909) The rites of passage. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Waller, W. (1932) The sociology of teaching. New York: Wiley.
- Willower, D. J. (1971a) Social control in schools. In Deighton, L. C. (Ed.) Encyclopedia of education (Vol. 8, pp. 245-253). New York: Macmillan and The Free Press.
- Willower, D. J. (1971b) The teacher subculture. In Drabick, L. W. (Ed.) Interpreting education: a sociological approach (pp. 107-120). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Willower, D. J. (1984) School principals, school cultures and school improvement. Educational Horizons. 63 (1) 35-38.
- Willower, D. J. (1986) Organization theory and the management of schools. In Hoyle, E. & McMahon, A. (Eds.) World yearbook of education, 1986: the management of schools. London: Kogan Page.